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SUBJECT: NO-CONFIDENCE VOTE, OPPOSITION RALLY FALL FLAT

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: PM Stanishev's coalition government on February 22 easily survived a vote of no confidence over corruption allegations. A united opposition protest rally February 21 in support of the vote failed to draw support, adding to the opposition's embarrassment. The opposition knew it could not win the vote against the coalition's majority but hoped to shake the government and stir up the public. Its gambit only demonstrated its weakness and reinforced the public perception that the government is likely to serve out its full term through mid-2009. END SUMMARY
THE VOTE: ALLEGATIONS OF CORRUPTION

¶2. (U) The no-confidence motion, the fourth submitted against the current government, came in the wake of a European Commission report criticizing Bulgaria for lack of progress in fight against high-level corruption and organized crime. It also followed a high-profile corruption scandal at the National Roads Agency that led to the dismissal of the agency's chief and the suspension of EU funds. Unlike the previous three motions, the fourth was the first attempt to coordinate all the parliamentary opposition -- three small center-right groups, extreme nationalist party Ataka and a newly-formed group of 17 NMS defectors -- and GERB, the rising new populist party of Sofia Mayor Borissov. (Note: having been launched after the latest parliamentary elections, GERB has no seats in parliament.)

¶3. (SBU) A lackluster eight-hour parliamentary debate preceded the vote, centering on the opposition's charges of corruption in procurement contracts and absorption of EU funds, cases of government officials' ties with shadowy groups, nepotism, and conflicts of interest. Ruling coalition MPs struck back by saying the center-right opposition had little credibility on corruption, given its own track-record during its 1997-2001 cabinet. The liveliest moment in the debate came when PM Stanishev mocked the opposition by himself unveiling its "shadow cabinet," naming Borissov PM and allotting deputy PM seats to two other opposition leaders with outsized egos and tattered reputations -- former center-right PM Ivan Kostov and Ataka leader Volen Siderov. The coalition handily defeated the motion with 149 votes to the opposition's 86. PM Stanishev called on the ruling majority not to become complacent but to work to stamp out corruption in the public sector.

Rally Flops

¶4. (SBU) On the day of the parliamentary debate, the main opposition parties staged a joint rally in central Sofia to protest against corruption in the government and demand its resignation and snap elections. In addition to supporting the no-confidence vote, the rally was intended to raise the profile of the opposition. The small center-right parties and GERB billed it as a first step toward coordination ahead of the next general elections and predicted a turnout of 100,000. The actual turnout was about 4,500. The bulk of the protestors were supporters of Ataka and GERB who were bussed in from the country. Some admitted in front of TV cameras they had been paid to attend ("Ataka people paid with GERB money," according to some observers). Few from the traditional center-right parties

-- the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and ex-PM Kostov's Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), showed up.

¶5. (SBU) Opposition leaders were embarrassed and told us they neither believed they could trigger early elections, nor would they want them. "The call for early elections is just a game we have to play to keep our electorate motivated," a senior GERB official told us. Both GERB and center-right politicians vowed this would be "the first and the last" joint rally with extremist, anti-West Ataka, saying the protest was needed to measure the mobilization of their electorates. Both UDF and GERB politicians were unhappy with this first action of the "joint opposition." An MP from ex-PM Kostov's DSB went as far as to publish an op-ed piece in which he claimed the no-confidence motion was a useless move that only exposed the impotence of the opposition, which is not ready to govern.

Bulgarian media also ridiculed the "pathetic action of the joint opposition," noting that instead of exposing existing corruption in the government, it only underlined the weakness of the center-right opposition and legitimized extreme nationalist Ataka.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: The small center-right parties and GERB flopped in their first attempt to coordinate political action and energize their supporters. The opposition's ill-conceived efforts made the ruling coalition appear more stable in comparison. Despite public unhappiness about corruption, recent opinion polls show the majority of Bulgarians do not want early elections and expect the ruling coalition to finish its mandate. Pundits and politicians agree that at this stage, any serious challenge to the coalition would more likely come from internal tensions rather than from the opposition.
END COMMENT.